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SUBJECT: Adams Delegation in Dashoguz Province: Also Optimistic and Ready for Cooperation

REF: ASHGABAT 137

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Discussion of future assistance needs and hopes -- a welcome replacement to rote glorification of Niyazov and the Ruhnama -- dominated an intensive visit to Dashoguz on February 2 by members of the U.S. interagency assistance delegation led by EUR/ACE Coordinator Tom Adams. In meeting after meeting -- including a session with the province's new governor -- the delegation's interlocutors welcomed assistance, particularly in the agricultural sector. While the assistance projects the delegation saw during its brief visit demonstrated that there is and has long been a cadre of individuals willing to participate in -- sometimes at a price -- programs to better their communities, the governor's apparent support is a welcome new development. End Summary.

A Full Day

¶2. (SBU) EUR/ACE Coordinator Tom Adams, USAID Assistant Administrator Douglas Menarchik and SCA/PPD Deputy Director Kathy Van De Vate made a one-day visit to Dashoguz, Turkmenistan's northernmost province on February 2. Focusing on present and possible future embassy assistance programs, the group met with alumni from the SABIT, Cochran, FLEX, UGRAD, Community Connections and Muskie exchange programs and visited an 800 year-old mausoleum being restored under the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, an award ceremony for a USAID Keeping Children Healthy campaign, two USAID community empowerment projects, and the American Corner and Counterpart Civil Society Support Center. First, however, the delegation met with the new hakim (governor) of Dashoguz Welayat (Province), Saparmyrat Ashyrov.

Ashyrov: A John Deere Salesman!

¶3. (SBU) At Ashyrov's invitation, Adams described the purpose of his visit to Turkmenistan, saying that he had met with Foreign Minister Meredov and had stressed that the United States could

double its assistance to Turkmenistan if the host government could do away with the bureaucratic obstacles that its programs had been experiencing. He and Foreign Minister Meredov had committed to try to smooth out the bumps, Adams informed Ashyrov. Adams noted that there had been some harassment in Dashoguz, with implementers and recipients being warned against cooperation with the United States and its programs. He said he hoped that the United States could find ways of working with provincial governments throughout Turkmenistan in order to eliminate this harassment. Adams welcomed Ashyrov's ideas about areas for future cooperation.

¶4. (SBU) Ashyrov, former Chairman of Turkmenistan's Food Industry Association, said that there was still much he did not know about his job because he had been hakim for only two months. Earlier, however, he had been head of the John Deere office in Turkmenistan for seven years; in that context, he had visited the United States many times and enjoyed working with Americans. Ashyrov stressed his appreciation for U.S. assistance and his wish to work together with the United States in order to make Dashoguz a better place for bilateral cooperation.

Education Assistance Welcome

¶4. (SBU) Clearly not well read-in on education and cultural issues, Ashyrov waffled on questions related to the needs for education and information technology assistance in his province, expressing general support for assistance, but deferring to his principle deputy, Charyguly Shadurdyev. Shadurdyev responded that:

-- The challenges in implementing a 10th year of education throughout the country were tough but manageable; even now, Turkmenistan's students were studying a condensed version of the 10-year curriculum, and there would be no problem attracting

ASHGABAT 00000167 002 OF 005

teachers;

-- Dashoguz' goal was to offer the same increased Internet access to all Dashoguz citizens as would be offered to citizens of Ashgabat.

In response to other questions about Peace Corps volunteers and assistance from a U.S.-funded English language specialist, Ashyrov welcomed the presence of more Peace Corps volunteers in Dashoguz, and expounded on the need to learn foreign languages.

Agricultural Assistance, Even More So

¶5. (SBU) Ashyrov was most animated and confident in discussing USDA's Cochran agricultural exchange program and the agricultural assistance needs of "his" new province. He acknowledged the positive contribution that Dashoguz' Cochran alumni had made and asked that the United States increase the number of program participants and send those participants to states with climates similar to Dashoguz'. Ashyrov particularly welcomed information on more efficiently growing cotton and raising livestock; he noted that Dashoguz' cotton season was 30 days shorter than other provinces' because it was further north. Dashoguz also needed better cotton seeds that could be harvested a single time, rather than needing multiple harvesting. However, Dashoguz had particularly good melons and pumpkins, and the new railway and the Ashgabat-to-Dashoguz road that was currently under construction would offer the primarily agricultural province new distribution and marketing opportunities. In response to a question on the status of a USAID-funded water treatment plant in Turkmenbashy Etrap (District), Ashyrov said that construction on a large new water purification plant for Dashoguz City would begin in the spring of 2007.

¶6. (SBU) The A/DCM welcomed any assistance suggestions that the Dashoguz provincial government wished to pass to the embassy. She thanked the hakim for the provincial government's assistance in recovering the body of the embassy driver who had been killed the previous week in a work-related automobile accident; she also thanked Ashyrov for the assistance provided by the provincial education department to the ACCELS staff, which had helped ensure

that Dashoguz had one of the least troubled FLEX testing sites in Turkmenistan. (Note: The ACCELS coordinator, who was carrying out third-round FLEX testing in Dashoguz City on February 2, told the delegation that the provincial education department head had subsequently made a surprise visit to the test site and had offered to assist if there were any -- repeat any -- problems. End Note.)

Ambassador's Fund Project: Preserving a Unique Site

¶7. (U) In Kone Urgench, located a 90-minute drive north of Dashoguz City, lie the 13th century ruins of a once-thriving capital of the Khorezm Empire that are now designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

A brutal attack and massacre by Genghis Khan, and subsequently by Tamerlane, left little intact of the ancient city, once an important center of Islamic learning with more than a million inhabitants; the mausoleums of a key Islamic philosopher and his follower stand on one side of the modern settlement, and a towering minaret and two more crumbling mausoleums lie, still largely intact, on the other. The entire historic location serves as an Islamic pilgrimage site, and every year thousands of devout Muslims continue to make their way to the complex in search of miracles.

¶8. (U) Within Kone Urgench, the United States is funding the restoration of the hip-roof dome of the 800 year-old Sultan Tekesh Mausoleum through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. The building, with a cone-shaped dome faced with light-blue glazed ceramic bricks and geometric ornamentation, is a unique example of pre-Mongolian Central Asian architecture. Students from Turkmenistan's State Academy of Arts are manufacturing replacement bricks and ceramic parts of the roof's decor using ancient techniques. The project is now about half done; delegation members saw both the beauty of the building and the site's cultural significance.

ASHGABAT 00000167 003 OF 005

ZdravPlus Awards: Keeping Children Healthier

¶9. (U) USAID's Keeping Children Healthy campaigns have sought since 2002 to improve the health of Turkmenistan's children as part of the overall healthcare reforms promoted within the framework of its ZdravPlus project. The program has focused on raising awareness among nurses and mothers about dangerous symptoms of child diseases, advising them when to call a doctor, and promoting early detection and timely treatment in order to decrease hospitalization levels for children. Since August 2002, ZdravPlus supported 21 community-based campaigns covering more than 35,000 citizens nationwide in its target population. More than 500 nurses have participated in the campaigns.

¶10. (SBU) Delegation members participated in an award ceremony recognizing the results of a public awareness campaign focused on acute respiratory infections, which started in November 2006 and had a target audience of more than 5000 women. Three mother-nurse winning teams, judged to be the most active participants in the contest, received kits of baby supplies (for the mother) and medical kits (for the nurses). In the ceremony, the mothers made short speeches about what they had learned in the program -- one, for example, learned not to give her baby strong drugs and antibiotics (available over-the-counter here) without consulting first with medical professionals. Another learned to focus on giving her baby nutrition-rich foods. The nurses all discussed the need to continue educating new mothers on how to raise their children more healthily.

All discussion was focused on the issue at hand, with no Niyazov or Ruhnama glorification. (Note: At the end of the program, however, the children, almost certainly as a sop to the past conventions, handed out English-language editions of the Ruhnama to the delegation members. End Note.)

¶11. (SBU) Most attention-grabbing, however, was the group of cute local kindergartners chosen to provide occasional musical breaks in the program. Whereas two months ago, these children would still have been singing and dancing, the content of their songs would have focused on praising President Niyazov and the Ruhnama; on this

particular day, however, they danced to traditional children's music and sang songs praising life, childhood and the need to take care of one's self.

Community Empowerment: Democracy at the Grassroots

¶12. (U) USAID awarded Counterpart International a grant in 2004 to implement the Water User Association Assistance Program. In Dashoguz, Counterpart implemented this program by supporting local agricultural support centers, which taught farmer organizations to manage local water delivery systems using sound business practices and democratic principles in carrying out community-based projects. The delegation visited two projects in separate communities.

¶13. (SBU) In the first, the local farmers organization identified a need for a new flour mill to help grind the 42,000 tons of wheat produced by the community each year. The lack of mills had forced farmers to transport their wheat over rough road to mills in neighboring districts, resulting in higher expenses and flour prices. With the assistance of USAID/Counterpart, the farmers prioritized a new flour mill and pasta-producing equipment which Counterpart then supplied through an equipment grant as a way to improve the quality of the flour and create a sideline business for the community. Most notable was the heavy involvement in the project of the community's senior women, who oversaw and managed most of the project details. After speeches of thanks by various community elders -- only one of whom (looking at the leather-coated official scribbling what was being said into a book) thanked President Niyazov for the community's "blessings" -- USAID Deputy Director Menarchik cut the ribbon to open the new flour mill for business with the entire community in attendance.

¶14. (SBU) In the second community, located well off the region's main road, choking of the irrigation ditches had led to heightened water table levels (exacerbating the salination of the soil) and a

ASHGABAT 00000167 004 OF 005

gradual blocking of the irrigation canals themselves. With the assistance of the USAID/Counterpart Agricultural Support Center, the farmers organized themselves to dredge out a total of 11,000 meters of drainage canals, lay 1300 meters of electrical line (including installing electrical poles), and install a water pump and power transformer. In all, the project benefited 850 people and improved the agricultural output of 350 hectares of farmland. Some 70 members of the community waited almost two hours to shake the delegation's hands and thank them for the assistance. All nodded proudly when Menarchik acknowledged what they had accomplished through collective community action; when asked if there was anything more they wanted to accomplish, community members vigorously started throwing out a number of additional ideas, including creation of a sewing workshop for the community's women and a new school building. One old man asked how many states there were in the United States; when he heard 50, he responded, "Maybe there should be 51, including Dashoguz!"

American Corner and Counterpart: Wells in the Desert

¶15. (SBU) Located in downtown Dashoguz is the building housing the Dashoguz American Corner and USAID/Counterpart's Civil Society Support Center. Collectively, these two entities provide an invaluable service to the people of Dashoguz, serving as a safe place for unlimited learning about the "real" world outside Dashoguz, and teaching visitors to think critically and care about and serve their communities.

¶16. (U) When the delegation arrived at the brightly decorated three-room American Corner at 6:00 pm, a beginner-level ACCESS English-language class for disadvantaged youth was just letting out; rather than rushing out, the eight young students gathered around for a few minutes proudly practicing their still-rudimentary English-language skills. Other young people were just hanging out, talking with Peace Corps volunteers about their lives and bouncing ideas off each other. One young woman was using the Corner's computer to complete a report for school. Two girls talked about

how they started going to the American Corner several years ago; they told one delegation member that the Corner was a "fun" place with lots of "interesting" programs where they could go to practice English and learn more about the United States.

¶17. (U) The Counterpart Civil Society Support Center is located in the same building. Since 2001, Counterpart has provided training programs for local activists or program grantees, and legal advice to NGOs and prospective civic organizations, but its current program is transitioning to the new Community Empowerment Project, which was awarded in late 2006. In spite of the late hour, Support Center staff were eager to meet the delegation and described its program offerings.

Meeting with Alumni: Dashoguz' Best and Brightest

¶18. (SBU) The Adams delegation met over dinner with a dozen Dashoguz-based alumni of U.S. exchange programs, including Franklin, FLEX, UGRAD, Muskie, Cochran, Community Connection and Junior Faculty Development (JFDP). When polled, all were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences as exchange alumni; most also were optimistic about their country's future, even with Interim President Berdimuhamedov being selected Niyazov's successor (all, by the way, saw this as the inevitable outcome of the February 11 presidential election). That said, most believed that Turkmenistan's political structure already had changed for the better, with power and decision-making now being shared collectively, rather than being vested in a single individual. Most also believed that the most immediate and biggest changes would come in the education sector. All acknowledged that change would be gradual and most expressed interest in being participants in that process.

¶19. (SBU) The most pragmatic and guardedly optimistic of the alumni were the three Cochran participants. As successful farmers and entrepreneurs, they identified the lack of private land ownership as the biggest barrier to increased agricultural production. Yet none

ASHGABAT 00000167 005 OF 005

believed that the leadership would willingly countenance such a development; this made the prospects for significant change in the highly touted March session of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council), which was to focus on agricultural reform, dim. Indeed, they believed, the Halk Maslahaty session would result in only cosmetic changes to agricultural policy. Nonetheless, even these hardy veterans of Turkmenistan's restrictive political system raised their hands when asked whether they were optimistic about the future, though one alumnus described his optimism as being "because we do not have any other choice."

¶20. (SBU) By contrast, the (much younger) FLEX and Franklin alumni were full of enthusiasm for the possibilities that they hoped would open up. Most already were active in their communities; one alumna was working on a program to take American Corner regulars to the school for the blind to teach English and Spanish; others worked as counselors in summer camps being led by Peace Corps volunteers.

Comment

¶21. (SBU) Most striking was the degree to which Niyazov and Ruhnama have disappeared from public life in the six weeks since the president's death. Once, most conversations -- especially with officials -- and any public events revolved around glorification of the leadership, yet it appears the oblique criticism of Niyazov policies being voiced by presidential candidates already is delivering the message that it is no longer necessary to pay tribute to the former leader and his works.

¶22. (SBU) Post is also encouraged by the current governor's apparent wish to work with the United States to better his province. Although, it has long been possible for particularly determined and dedicated citizens to work within their system to effect change, that civic activism occasionally has come at a steep price. In this sense, post notes that the incidents involving harassment of grantees occurred under the previous governor, a Presidential

Security apparatchik, rather than under Ashyrov. Post hopes that this may be the beginning of a more productive relationship. End Comment.

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